An Age Old Dialogue

by Richard Menzies

Sam the hermit lives on a fertile plot at the north end of pastoral Heber Valley, in a house he built sixty years ago and which, in ten years, according to plans by the Central Utah Project, will lie at the bottom of a lake. Sam will be dispossessed, or relocated, in the terminology of engineering, and his small, quiet place in the world will become submerged history. We asked him what he would do then, and Sam said he'd probably live in a rest home somewhere; but, he added, "it won't be as nice."

One day last fall reporter Jim Lind and I decided to pay a visit on the old man, whom neither of us had seen before, except from a safe distance. To reach his shack we climbed through a gateless barbed wire fence and made our way through a swampy field that was like a moat. In the hermit's yard was a fine row of willow trees and a woodshed stocked for winter, beside which a rusting automobile hull of unknown vintage served as a planter for a variety of weeds. The hermit's home was a two story log structure with a flat roof, surrounded on all sides like a gopher hole by empty cans, bottles, and junk. The lower windows were blinded by more indoor trash that must have filled the house to the second floor. We found the hermit on his porch, abstractly comtemplating junk, and it was sometime later more before he found us, for his hearing and eyesight were not keen.

When at last he discovered us, he responded to our bright salutation with a mixture of mistrust and annoyance, and throughout our talk he kept "eyeballing" us suspiciously.

Sam wore an ancient pair of coveralls that covered, I think, nothing, and an old amorphous hat. His long white and yellowish hair reached to his shoulders, his beard covered his chest. He leaned on a crooked staff and peered out from under bushy eyebrows with one eye squinted. The impression was fantastic, recalling a childhood vision of the troll that lived under the bridge.

As I mentioned before, the hermit was inclined to suspicion, and for awhile our conversation dwelt on the weather, the trees, and such diversionary matter befitting two trespassers. We weren't getting anyplace with the interview until at last Jim, resorting to genealogy, managed to trace his ancestry back to someone of Sam's acquaintance. Afterward, he was more at ease, though he admitted he didn't like "a lot of city folks pokin' around and askin' questions."

He told us he was eighty three, and we responded that he certainly didn't look it, although he certainly did. He said he had lived in the valley for sixty years and before that in Park City; he remembered the great fire in that town, though not vividly.

"Have you always lived alone?" I asked. "Do you keep a pet?"

"No," he replied, "I used to keep a horse or a dog years ago. But you know, you just can't have *one* thing. If you do, then you have to stay home and tend it."

"Do you go out often?" Jim asked.

"No."

We asked him how he cooked, and what he used for light, and if he had any electricity.

"No I don't. I don't need any. I don't have anything that'll run on electricity."

Jim, who is struggling to grow a moustache, complimented him on his fine head and face of hair, and asked him how he managed to keep it in such good shape.

"Well, I have to trim it sometimes," he said, indicating with his finger the hole where his mouth was. "Makes it easier to eat, for one thing."

Then I asked him about his teeth and inquired after the front ones, which were missing.

"Pulled 'em out this spring with pliers," he explained. "They got so they wuz bitin' me, so I had to pull 'em out."

"Doesn't that make it hard to eat?"

"Yes, it does. But it's easier to spit."

"Have you always worn a beard?" we asked.

"Yes . . .well, no. When I was in the army they made me shave. They made me shave every morning, and then the lieutenant asked me if I couldn't shave in the morning and at night both. Well, that was going a bit far, I think."

"If you lived in the city, they'd probably call you a hippy," I said.

"A what?" he asked, cupping his hand to his ear.

"A hippy!" I shouted.

"Oh . . . a nicky!" He nodded with perfect understanding.

As we talked, Sam had retrieved a canvas water bag from the junkpile and was setting about getting water from the creek. Jim and I followed him across the mushy field. A high-flying jet rumbled overhead, and the hermit paused and craned his neck to observe the passing of the twentieth century. Then he continued toward the creek. "I can't see 'em like I used to, they go so fast nowadays," he said, then added, "But I can see a helicopter."

We came to the barbed wire fence, which he climbed over, nearly losing his footing on some rocks. "You know, nature is funny," he mused irrelevantly. "None of us understand much about it. But we're all going down the same road."

There followed a poignant pause, while we struggled to divine the significance of the statement. Jim broke the silence. "I'll bet you've heard a lot of stories, living around here for so long."

"Yes, I have. And that's just what they are — stories!" He seemed not much interested in entertaining us further, and a little tired of our company. Arriving at the stream, he bent down and began filling the water bag.

"I'll bet that's the best water in the whole country," I ventured, a little tritely. He didn't reply.

"What do you eat, anyway?" Jim asked.

Sam replied that he'd eat most anything, so long as it was "good and clean." "I always eat clean food," he said.

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